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AUTHOR Magrath, Douglas R.
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ABSTRACT

Second language reading is a vital skill that aids the communication process. It provides language input and reinforces spoken language. Because the modern world is print-oriented, foreign language and English-as-a-Second-Language learners need to develop reading skills as rapidly as possible. Reading must be taught rather than acquired passively. Early reading instruction using target culture realia and computer-assisted instruction can enhance language exposure. Some obstacles to early introduction of a reading component exist, including lack of appropriate or interesting beginning-level materials and reliance on the language experience approach in which students write their own, often erroneous, materials. However, the creative teacher can generate useful texts and activities from materials at hand. Text passages should deal with the learners' immediate environment and everyday situations, with insight into the target culture. Campus and town activities are a good starting point. Texts should be supplemented with problems-solving activities that develop reading skills. After text reading and problem-solving, students can proceed to totally creative activities. Word recognition in unfamiliar alphabets must also be addressed, and aggressive intervention for various reading subskills (e.g., guessing from context, visual discrimination, eye movement, skimming, and scanning) is useful. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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6 Early Foreign Language Reading

Douglas R. Magrath
Rhodes College

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The focus of foreign language (FL) and English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teaching methods and materials continues to shift as a result of a general call for a more natural or functional approach as opposed to a traditional or grammar-based curriculum. Is reading an aid to total communication? Does the early introduction of reading in the foreign language (L2) improve proficiency? Or should reading and writing be left to the more advanced levels or second-language instruction? This paper will address the need for the early introduction of reading skills and will provide some helpful hints to the teacher for materials development and classroom activities.

The Need

Reading in L2 is a vital skill that definitely aids the communication process. Reading provides language input and reinforces the spoken language. Diller (1980) observes that "learning how to read and write, far from being a hindrance to speech, will act instead as strong reinforcement if it is done concurrently with—not weeks or months later (than)—learning how to speak" (pp. 21-22).

Foreign language and ESL learners need to develop reading skills as rapidly as possible since the modern world is print oriented. Anyone living or working in another country will have to deal with the printed word from day one; early literacy is vital, particularly if the language has an unfamiliar alphabet. Early reading intervention using realia from the target culture will prepare the learners for everyday tasks as well as related learning activities such as computer-assisted instruction (CAI) and effective communication in writing (for example, dialogue journals and letters). Since computer programs exist for Arabic, Hebrew, and

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Russian as well as the Latin-based languages and ESL, CAI can be an integral part of the reading program. The information explosion provides many new ways for classes to be exposed to the target languages and cultures, and an ability to read will further enhance these activities. Lado (1977) has commented that "at this stage in our professional knowledge...reading should begin when language teaching begins. The pre-reading oral period no longer seems justified" (p. 14). Dr. Lado's observation is for ESL teaching, but the same principles apply to FL teaching as well.

Communication takes place when the L2 is used for sending a real message to meet a specific need and for solving problems. The general consensus is that translations, transformational drills, and memorization may meet certain needs, but these activities do not lead in themselves to the development of functional ability in the language. Krashen and Terrell (1983) note that "according to the input hypothesis, language acquisition can only take place when a message which is being transmitted is understood, i.e. when the focus is on what is being said rather than on the form of the message"(p. 55).

Learners need reading because it is an active skill in which the writer communicates with the reader across time. Reading is more than speech written down; it is a vital part of the L2 system and should be addressed early in the language course. Active early intervention by the instructor is necessary; reading must be taught rather than acquired passively, and it must be presented in a learner-friendly manner as realistically as possible.

Problems

We have established the need for early reading as part of an overall communicative curriculum, but there remain some obstacles to the introduction of an early reading component. FL texts on the market are often too advanced for beginning-level learners since they contain complex structures and a flood of new vocabulary. Such material can overwhelm the reader and create a feeling of frustration and discouragement. This fact is especially true for non-western languages where cognates are few and a new alphabet compounds the initial difficulty. Reading passages containing literary excerpts, although they provide good authentic material, are often too advanced for a novice. Even materials such as advertisements and notices or newspaper

cartoons often thought of as "easy," contain cultural material, proper names, idioms, and specialized vocabulary that can discourage beginners.

Conversely, specifically designed L2 reading material can be dull or irrelevant—the "John goes to the seashore" variety of passage that is diluted and written by the author to illustrate a specific grammar point. A set of questions at the end of such a passage requires specific recall, but can we say that the students actually have "read" this passage for the purpose of gaining new information? Or have they just mechanically looked for answers to the Wh-questions without giving the matter any serious thought?

The "language experience approach" where the students compose their own "reader" through classroom and blackboard exercises offers a possible solution to the class looking for reading material. But the potential for error is high as the resulting texts often contain "interlanguage"; also, these student-generated passages tend to be limited in scope and vocabulary. Look at the following example taken from ESL:

I came to the United States.
I studied English.
I got my driver's license.
I got a job at University.
I won the sweepstakes.

(Bowen, Madsen, Hilferty, 1985, p. 222)

This text could be written in any L2. It is simple and easy to comprehend, but it is repetitive and skewed somewhat and it lacks a really communicative message, seeming to be more of a study of the past tense than anything else. This exercise is a valid classroom activity useful for a warm-up, review, or even a pre-test, but it cannot form the core of a reading program.

Possible Solutions

A creative teacher is not without recourse, however. A variety of "learner-friendly" texts and activities can be generated by the instructor from materials that are readily at hand. The following helpful hints have proven to be useful in both FL and ESL classrooms where beginning

learners were working to develop reading skills. These activities involve both teacher-generated material and adaptations of commercially available texts and are designed to enhance L2 acquisition through communication.

Hint 1: Texts

It is possible for the instructor to develop texts and skill-building exercises for even the lowest level language learners. The content of the passages should deal with the learners' immediate environment and the situations they face every day along with an insight into the target culture. Campus and town activities are a good starting point as are simple descriptions of people and places. Students in beginning classes can read descriptions of the campus, the bookstore, or the student center given through the eyes of an L2 native visiting the campus. Later passages can deal with cultural contrasts and similarities. The instructor can write out these texts based on the campus situation. A very basic passage can be just a written biography of a character from a dialogue—an ambassador for example. A little later in the course, a situation that a foreign student in this country might face if travelling in the L2 culture could be simulated. Think of something humorous that will hold the students' interest. Perhaps Karl or Jacques will need to ride the city bus one day in the USA. What might happen? Here is an example—given in English—of a possible adventure.

The City Bus

Karl lives near University where he studies English. He usually takes the city bus on school days. On the bus he reads the paper or practices his English with the other riders. It is not a long trip but he has to make one transfer before he gets off at the university. The whole trip usually takes between 20 and 30 minutes.

Karl: Hi Mark, are you ready for class?

Mark: Yes, I think, I am working on the verbs now.

Karl: Do you always take this bus?

Mark: Yes, I ride it every day to Community College.

Karl: Community College? This bus goes to
..... State University.

Mark: No, this is number 54. It does downtown. I get
off at 4th Street and walk over to the college.

Karl: Oh no! I am on the wrong bus, I think. Driver,
is this a 52 to State University?

Driver: No

Mark: It is a 54 to 4th Street

Driver: Wrong. This is a 32 to the airport.

This teacher-made encounter is given in the target language and can be set in this country or overseas. Note the humorous twist at the end. If the students laugh, it is clear that they have understood. For this selection the writer assumes that the students have a working knowledge of present verbs and basic sentence structure. One or two high frequency items that the students have not gone over yet can be included, provided the students are not flooded with difficult constructions.

Authentic L2 material can also be accessed and adapted by an innovative teacher. Guidebooks, advertisements, and native-student writings all make good sources. These can be rephrased and shortened to fit a particular class. Even the most basic beginners need to be exposed to the written code of the target language. Note the following example of a low level reading. Again, the situation may depend on the culture of the L2. This particular example is set in a student health center.

The Doctor

Maria is a doctor. She works at the health center at
..... University. Sick students come to her office,
and she takes care of their medical problems. She is a
very busy person, but doctors are always very busy.
Maria enjoys her job because she likes helping people and
she meets many interesting students from all over the
world.

Maria: What is the matter? Are you sick?

José: I'm fine, but my foot hurts really bad. I don't
know what is the matter with it.

Maria: Does it hurt all the time?

José: No, only during the day.

Maria: Here is your problem; you need new shoes.

José: New shoes. That is unusual. Why?

Maria: Your foot is OK, but you have a nail in your shoe. That is causing your problem!

Once again note the use of dialogue and humor. This basic scene can be brought into the L2 being taught, provided the necessary cultural adjustments are made. Or it can be set in a specific college or university with the players being exchange students.

Hint 2: Problem Solving

These teacher-made texts are useful, but texts alone do not make a reading course. The students will try to memorize and translate the passages in anticipation of the next quiz. The reading class can be turned into a problem-solving activity by including skill development exercises. The following example is used to help beginning learners of Modern Standard Arabic, but the concept is valid for any L2. It is teacher-made and printed on a computer.

READING 6 (weeks 8 or 9 of a 4-hour course)
(An introductory dialogue is given first.)

"My name is Fu'ad Khoury. I am a student from Lebanon, and I study here at the University. I have four classes which are English, Middle East history, psychology, and political science. I also play basketball with the university team. I am always busy with studying, sports, and working in the library. I do not live in the dorm; rather I live in an apartment and I ride the bus to the university. My apartment is large and two friends from Lebanon live with me."

The vocabulary is high frequency and student oriented. This type of reading passage will be assimilated better than the typical exercise of a more grammar-based approach. Note the following reading passage from a text for Arabic. The level is about the same as the preceding.

Exercise 5.2 Reading aloud, then translate:

1. My cheap watch.
2. Salim's package is heavy.
3. The important announcement of the papers.
4. The fat driver of the car. (Smart 1986, p. 63)

The first exercise is much more realistic than the isolated sentence in the second. After the students read through the passage about Fu'ad Khoury, they are required to think of themselves in a similar situation:

Exercise 1. Write about yourself.

I at The University of I am from
 I have classes which are
, and I am always busy. I enjoy
 and I live in

Each student's response will be different. They can prepare notes and ask each other questions. The teacher should also do the exercise about his or her own situation, "I am professor of at" and share it with the class.

Next the learners can change the given text in a number of ways as a grammatical exercise. For example, they can change Fu'ad Khoury to Sa'idah Khoury thus making all the verbs and adjectives feminine, but such a grammatical transformation should be immediately followed by a communicative exercise where the focus is on authentic language use.

Other functional exercises can include synonyms, comprehension questions, word forms, and sentence combining. All of these encourage the learner to work with the written form of the L2 without having to translate into English.

The following is based on a reading about life in Beirut and illustrates one way an activity might be constructed.

Choose the correct word.

Husan is a teacher. (His house) (My house) (This) is in Beirut. He eats in the (living) (dining) (bed) room and watches television in the (living) (waiting) (dining) room. The cook (fem.) [cooks (fem.)] [cooks (masc.)] (studies) in the kitchen (etc.)

This is an example of a sentence-combining exercise.

Rewrite the passage by combining sentences.

1. 'Abd al-Aziz is a king. He is a great king. His home is in Najd.
2. He lives in a city. The city is beautiful. Its name is Al-Riad.
3. He is a ruler. He is just. The people love him.

.....
 (..... 'Abd al-Aziz is a great king in Najd. He lives in a beautiful city called Al-Riad. He is a just ruler and the people love him. (Adapted from Ziadeh and Winder 1957, Unit 12.)

This particular reading passage was about King Abd al-Aziz. Instead of merely translating it, the learners work through the problem-solving exercise. The finished exercise should be written down on the board and the class can then re-read the passage in its new form.

Hint 3: Authoring

The preceding examples are a step beyond the basic reading exercises found in most texts, but they still are somewhat mechanical in nature. After reading the passage and going over the written work, the learners should move on to totally creative activities. For example, they can write mini-biographies of characters in the readings and dialogues.

Write a biography of Karl (from "The City Bus").

Birth place.....

School

College.....

Major.....

Sports..... (Di Donato, 1986).

If the students are beginners, care should be taken not to overload them. As they provide the information for the chart, the teacher can fill it in, then write out the biography as a short supplemental reading passage. This is something the students themselves help to create; it has high interest value and is much more meaningful than "The house is big" or "John goes to the seashore" type of activity.

Another possibility is to have the class invent an ending to a given story as in the following example:

Karl and Mark are on the wrong bus. What happens now? Mark says to the driver, "....." Driver: "You can't get off now. The next stop is a Karl and Mark get off at, then they"

Or three possible endings to the story could be given; the class chooses one and gives an explanation.

Another way for the learners to become involved in the reading and writing activity is to provide them with a matrix and have them generate a passage from the material. Present a chart of information for reading and discussion, guide the class through a short writing exercise, then share the written passages as a further reading/skillbuilding activity. This activity is aimed at early beginners, therefore it does not have to have more than a few lines of material. A trip chart is an excellent starting point:

Monday	Cairo	(Air)
Tuesday	Alexandria	(Train)
Wednesday	Aman	(Air)
Thursday	Damascus	(Bus)
Friday	Allepo	(Bus)

This type of exercise focuses on language functions in real situations. Rather than just reading through a passage and memorizing, the students discuss a planned activity and learn place names, modes of transportation, and the verbs necessary for the particular situation, such as travel, ride, fly and so on. They can add to the chart as well. For example: Where will they stay in each city? What will they see? What will they do? Depending on the level of the class, the activity could be set in the past or the number of stops could be increased. Each student can then write out a passage or the instructor can take a composite of the student responses and make up a passage for the entire class to work through.

Hint 4: Unfamiliar Alphabet

Encourage L2 readers to recognize whole words as well as to decode phonetically. Word recognition is especially important for languages with non-Latin alphabets. Both phonetic decoding and sight word recognition are important subskills; the two work together and learners should be encouraged to apply both strategies. This approach is used successfully to teach ESL to non-literate adults, and there is no reason why it cannot be used to teach an L2 with an unfamiliar alphabet. Note the following from Bowen, Madsen, & Hilfery (1985):

There is no conclusive evidence that either the Whole Word or the Linguistic Method (precise decoding) for introducing reading texts works best with all students. Nor is there any assurance that when reading, a student will practice only one or the other exclusively. Current research shows that adult learners usually figure out the sound-symbol patterns no matter what the teacher's approach, and that the average learner just beginning to read ESL decodes spelling patterns, recognizes whole words, guesses from context, and makes predictions. (p. 224)

Thus a mixed wholistic approach is recommended for ESL, and the same concepts transfer readily into FL teaching when a non-Latin alphabet is involved. The sight words give the students something to work with right away while they are learning how to decode them phonetically (Magrath, forthcoming.)

Hint 5: Subskills

The various reading subskills of guessing from context, visual discrimination, eye movement photography, and skimming and scanning from the native language (L1) may not always transfer into L2, particularly given the general decline of L1 reading skills. Thus these skills should be enhanced by aggressive intervention on the part of the reading instructor. The following example from Yorkey (1981) may seem very basic, but it makes an important point.

Jack's arrows were nearly all gone, so he sat down and stopped hunting. Then he saw Henry making a bow to a little girl . . . she had tears in her dress and tears in her eyes. (p. 4)

Notice the first inclination to understand bow as part of a bow and arrow set. Students have learned this skill in L1 and need to transfer the contextual guessing to L2. This is the reason why the reading passages should be unified wholes and not just isolated sentences. The semantic message and the words should work together to transmit the message.

Conclusion

The content of the early reading passages should deal with realistic situations likely to be faced by the target group of learners. These readings are much more likely to be comprehended and remembered than grammatical passages or stories about run-away trains. Adding to stored knowledge is more effective than attempting to retain new material that has no base. As Rivers and Melvin (1977) have stated, "Second language material must build on what students know and what arouses their curiosity at their age and in their circumstances" (p. 58).

The reading strategies discussed here are an aid to active communication as well as an enhancement to the internalization of the target language. After developing basic reading skills through the application of these suggestions, the learners will be ready to go on to more difficult passages and unedited material in the target language.

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